

Backlash of American Strikes Against the Houthis

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Introduction

Military and security developments in the southern Red Sea still raise concerns and about the trajectory of the current escalation, which has sharpened in the past two years, and was closely related to the war in Yemen that started nearly 9 years ago. The last version of the current escalation seems to be closely related to the war that Israel has been waging on Gaza since last October.

American strikes that targeted Houthi sites and camps in north and west of Yemen opened the door to escalatory measures in an area that is the scene of a number of foreign military bases and regional and international coalitions. In such a locale, armed and cross-border conflicts are very likely, especially in light of the competition between the various actors locally, regionally and internationally to expand their control and influence in this region, in which the vital Bab Al-Mandab strait is located. Historically, conflicts and wars have long arose, sometimes between countries on its coasts, and sometimes between these countries and outside powers that were motivated by their imperial ambitions to secure a foothold that would enable them to guarantee their interests and enhance their presence.

In the past few days, Houthi military bases were hit by several air strikes launched by the United States and its allies in response to the Houthi attacks on commercial ships in the southern Red Sea over the past two months (mid-November 2023- early January 2024).

Last December, the United States announced the formation of Prosperity Guardian, a military coalition that included some 10 countries, most notably the United States and the United Kingdom. Bahrain was the only Arab country that formally joined the coalition.

This study deals with the new escalation, represented by the strikes against Houthi targets, and potential repercussions at the local, regional and international levels.

Military bases and regional and international coalitions in the southern Red Sea

Bab al-Mandab Strait is considered one of the most important international waterways because it is part of an important water surface, represented by the Red Sea and because of its important geographical location of the strait which constitutes the territorial waters of Asian and African countries (Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea). These factors contributed to viewing it as a priority of the strategy of major countries and their colonial ambitions since the 16th century.

Bab al-Mandab Strait is a heavy choke point in an international waterway. This status is due to its strategic location at the end of the southern entrance of the Red Sea, which is the shortest waterway linking the East and West by virtue of its geographical features, and its control of global trade. It gained in importance after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and discovering the largest oil reservoir in the Arabian Peninsula.

Escalation in the southern Red Sea region near the Bab al-Mandab Strait has started in the past few years. In July 2018, Houthi militants attacked two Saudi tankers, pushing Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude oil exporter, to suspend oil shipments. That came after the Houthis threatened to close the Bab al-Mandab Strait to navigation— a threat that was taken seriously by some, especially since it was issued by an armed group with links to Iran, which is viewed as a rogue state. Tehran's opponents took the Houthi threat to be actually triggered by Iran because the Houthis are Iran's agents in the region who implement its orders.

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The Houthi threat to close the Bab al-Mandab strait coincided with the Iranian threat to close the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, if it were banned from exporting oil as the United States threatened after its withdrawal from the nuclear deal that was signed in 2015.

The Houthi and Iranian threats elicited regional and international reactions. In January 2020, the Council of Arab and African States Overlooking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden was established in Riyadh. It consisted of 8 Arab and African countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. According to the founding statement, the council fills “the need for coordination and consultation on the waterway, as the Red Sea is the main passageway of East Asian and European countries.” It affirmed that the council will work to “preserve common interests, counter all risks, and cooperate to benefit from available opportunities.”

In April 2022, the US Naval Forces announced the formation of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 153, whose mission was to patrol the Red Sea and combat “terrorist activities and smuggling.” According to the commander of the Fifth Fleet, Admiral Brad Cooper, the force will “enhance cooperation with regional maritime partners to achieve security in the Red Sea, parts of the Indian Ocean, Bab al-Mandab strait and the Gulf of Aden.”

It is worth noting that CTF 153 is the fourth division of the Combined Maritime Force (CMF). In December 2022, Egypt assumed the command of CTF operations. This was the first time it assumed the command since it joined the maritime combined forces, which consisted of 39 countries in April 2021. This force aims to “improve security in all maritime passageways, ensure the safe passage of vessels in international waters and fight all forms of organized crime which negatively affects global trade transit and the interests of partner countries.” The United States assumes leadership of those forces on 12 June 2023.

Houthi attacks in the Red Sea

From November 19 to January 10, the Houthis launched 26 attacks on commercial ships sailing in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, according to US CENTCOM statements. The largest attack came on January 10, according to a statement by the British Defense Secretary, Grant Shapps, who described the attack as the “largest”. He added that British and American navy forces repelled the largest Houthi attack so far on ships in the Red Sea.

According to a CENTCOM statement, the Houthis launched about 20 (suicide) drones, cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles towards the international navigation corridors in the southern Red Sea. It added that 18 drones, 2 cruise missile and a ballistic missile were downed, with 4 warships taking part in the operation.

British Defense Secretary, Grant Shapps had warned in a statement that these illegal attacks are completely unacceptable and if continued the Houthis will bear the consequences, and we will take the action needed to protect innocent lives and the global economy.”

While the Houthis announce that their attacks target the ships linked with Israel, in response to the war on Gaza, and confirm that they will continue to “prevent Israeli ships and ships heading to the ports of occupied Palestine from navigation in the Red and Arabian Seas until the aggression stops and the siege on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip is lifted.” US Navy commander, Lieutenant General Brad Cooper, says that the ships targeted by the Houthis in recent attacks were not linked with Israel.

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Two weeks after the American strikes against them, the Houthis announced that their forces “engaged a number of US destroyers and warships in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, as those ships were escorting two American commercial ships.” This statement bodes dangerous acceleration and mutual escalation in the region.

The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution condemning the Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and cargo ships in the Red Sea, and demanding immediate cessation of all attacks.

Resolution 2722, supported by 11 members, while 4 members abstained from voting, demanded that “the Houthis immediately cease all such attacks, which impede global commerce and undermine navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace and security,” It stressed that “the exercise of navigational rights and freedoms by merchant and commercial vessels, in accordance with international law, must be respected, and takes note of the right of Member States, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms.”

The adoption of the resolution is a victory for the US administration, which, along with Japan, submitted the raft resolution, especially as the amendments proposed by Russia did not receive the required support. It was adopted after 11 of the 15 members of the Security Council voted for it, while Russia, China, Algeria and Mozambique refrained from voting.

During the meeting held by the UN Security Council to discuss the resolution on January 10, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas Greenfield, said that the decision recognizes that regional dynamics- including Iran’s providing of advanced weapons that enabled the Houthis to target ships- have contributed to this situation. The American ambassador emphasized the right of states to defend commercial ships from attacks, and added that there would be consequences if Houthi attacks continued.

US strikes and international reactions

Since the dawn of January 12, 2024, Houthi sites in the north and west of Yemen have been hit by US and British strikes carried out by combat aircraft and Tomahawk missiles, with the aim of “weakening the Houthi offensive capabilities on commercial ships in the Red Sea.” According to US officials, strikes have targeted radar systems, and drone, ballistic missile and cruise missiles stores and launch sites.

According to observers, Washington and the coalition it leads in the Red Sea, has sought during the past weeks, to “avoid direct strikes on Yemen due to the risks of escalation in a region already boiling with tension, but the Houthi attacks on international shipping have forced the coalition to act.”

The United States and nine countries that joined it last December in a military coalition in the Red Sea sated that joint air strikes against Houthi targets aimed at reducing escalation in the region. “The aim of the strikes is to reduce escalation and restore stability to the Red Sea, and to ensure freedom of trade in one of the most important water corridors in the world in the face of continuous threats,” said a joint statement by the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, Britain, the United States and Bahrain.

US President, Joe Biden, spoke about successful strikes against a number of targets that the Houthis use to endanger the freedom of navigation, while British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak described the strikes as “necessary and commensurate” and said that they were in “self -defense.” As for NATO, he said it is “defensive strikes and aims to maintain freedom of navigation.”

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In the same context, the American administration re-placed the Houthis on the list of international terrorist groups, and considered their attacks a clear example of terrorism, violation of international law, and a major threat to lives and global trade. Washington justified its decision by Houthis involvement in unprecedented attacks against American military forces, international naval ships operating in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, exposing civilians and sailors from the US and allied countries to risk, and threatening the freedom of global navigation. According to US administration officials, the relisting aimed to deter the Houthis from their continuous aggression in the Red Sea, and did not aim to influence the fragile truce in Yemen. However, observers believe that the relisting comes at a time when a broader regional war is looming in the Middle East.

In its last weeks at the White House, the Trump administration listed the Houthis as a specially designated global terrorist group. The Houthis were listed under “foreign terrorist organizations,” but the Biden administration, in its early say at the White House, in February 2021, hastened to reverse the designation and removed the Houthis from the terrorist group list and from the terrorist organizations list. At that time, the Biden administration justified its decision to remove the Houthis from the terrorist list as driven by concerns that it might endanger the critical aid provided to the Yemeni people.

The military strikes against the Houthis by the United States and its allies came weeks after voicing threats, mobilization of support and preparations until Washington’s efforts in the UN Security Council culminated in the adoption of the draft resolution submitted by the US and Japan. However, this does not mean that the strikes received unanimous support. Indeed, some countries rejected and condemned them, especially China and Russia, the archenemies of the United States. China expressed great concern about the raids. The Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, said that American raids did not “contribute to the protection of the safety and security of the commercial vessels and freedom of navigation.” He added that “military operations could also undermine the political process in Yemen.” The Chinese official criticized the US policy that supported the continued conflict in Gaza and at the same time expected it not to spread. He said that “calling for the prevention of the spillover of the conflict on the one hand, while adding fuel to the fire on the other hand by provoking military confrontation is self-contradictory and irresponsible.” He pointed out that “The Middle East region is already on the brink of extreme danger. The last thing we need at this stage is reckless military adventurism.”

Russia also condemned the air strikes, saying that the military operation only leads to escalation of tensions in the Middle East, and betrays striking ignorance of international law. Spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, The US air strikes in Yemen are the latest example of the Anglo-Saxons’ distortion of UN Security Council resolutions.”

Likewise, Iran, which backs the Houthis, condemned the raids. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Nasser Kanaani, said that “these attacks constitute a clear violation of Yemen’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and are a violation of international law. They will only lead to destabilizing security and stability in the region.”

Russia had argued with the Americans and their allies in the Security Council in the meeting in which the resolution condemning Houthi attacks was issued. The Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, described the resolution as “an attempt to legitimize the actions of the coalition formed by the United States and its allies after the strikes, and get an open blessing for them in the Security Council.” The Russian ambassador said that “restoring calm in the Red Sea requires resolving the Israeli -Palestinian conflict and putting an end to the massacre in Gaza.”

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The joint Russian-Iranian condemnation came in a statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry two days after the inception of the American raids. According to the statement, the foreign ministers of the two countries “expressed their strong condemnation of the extensive strikes carried out by a group of countries led by the United States and Britain on Yemeni territory.” The two ministers called for an “immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip,” and stressed “the importance of facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip without obstacles to provide urgent assistance to the population.”

In the Security Council too, Algeria- the non-permanent member- refrained from voting on this resolution. During the meeting, the Algerian ambassador to the United Nations, Amar Bendjama, pointed out that “military intervention in Yemen may carry risks of undermining the efforts made by the United Nations in the past.” He said: “We preferred to refrain from voting because we cannot be linked to a text that ignores 23,000 people who were killed during the last three months in Gaza.”

Houthi military capabilities

Western media and analysts raised the question about the effectiveness of American raids and strikes in eliminating or alleviating the military capabilities of the Houthis. The diverse Houthi arsenal has raised international concern, especially since the Houthi attacks during the past months showed that they possess various and highly weapons that can cause fatal damage to commercial ships and international navigation in the region. Questions and concerns are also raised about the sources of Houthi weapons, especially those weapons that the Iranian military does not possess. James Holmes, J. C. Wylie Chair of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College, said, “Houthi rocketeers have fired an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM)—a genre of weaponry ostensibly possessed only by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force—against merchant shipping.”

In a report published by National Interest, Holmes said “No disrespect to the Houthi scientific-technical enterprise, which I’m sure is formidable, but it strains credulity to believe a substate group—and a group that happens to be supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, an informal client of China—has mastered technology that’s beyond everybody except Chinese engineers.” He wondered whether Beijing is proliferating missile technology. The American analyst explained that it seemed unlikely that the supervisors of the Chinese People’s Army, on their own, will transfer a weapon system with such a force to Iran, as it may go to the Houthi and others according to Iran’s tendencies.

The attacks by the Houthis on ships in the Red Sea revealed that they had an arsenal of weapons, most notably:

- Anti-ship Cruise missiles, (80-300 km range), according to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Ballistic missiles, with up to 300 km range that need updated information about targets, which is usually provided by drones, boats or allies in the region. These Cruise and ballistic missiles are one of the biggest concerns, according to the writer specializing in maritime history and professor adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Sal Mercogliano, who thinks the missiles are faster, their motor power greater, and thus hunting them is more difficult compared to the relatively slow drones. Moreover, these missiles carry larger and more harmful loads, and interception of ballistic missiles requires special weapons and capabilities.

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- suicide drone: which are cheap and easy to install compared to missiles.
- Naval mines, a device that explodes automatically after being placed in the waters to destroy ships or submarines. These mines are used to paralyze shipping, harm vessels, or direct them towards a specific port in the event of kidnapping or piracy. Marine mines pose a severe danger to international navigation, trade lines and global oil supplies, in addition to being an existential threat to the lives of the Yemeni fishermen and residents of Yemeni islands in the Red Sea.

The Houthi group placed naval mines along the Red Sea coast, especially off the coast of Midi Port, populated islands, fishing sites, and near the international navigation line in the Red Sea.

- Small explosive or suicide boats, developed from small fishing boats, and are controlled remotely. Their small size is a big challenge because monitoring devices are slow in discovering them.

According to a report published by The National News website, the largest part of the Houthi arsenal today consists of Berkane-3 long-range missiles capable of hitting targets 1,200 km away, Badr B-1 missiles, with a range of 150 km, and missiles Farouj-7 (called Zelzal by the Houthis), which date back to the Soviet era, with a range of 65 km.

Local, regional and international repercussions of American strikes in Yemen

When it comes to the repercussions and the projected outcomes of the American offensive against the Houthis in a number of Yemeni provinces, Yemen's peace negotiations are the most affected arena by the current escalation. Observers expect that the Houthis will find in this escalation a justification for violating, even cancelling, the truce that has withstood for nearly two years. This means stopping peace negotiations between the Yemeni parties and resuming hostilities in more than one governorate. Indeed, Houthi escalation was evident in the past few days in the north of Al-Dhali' and on the outskirts of the Bayhan district in Shabwa Governorate. Houthi leaders also threatened to expand the theater of operations.

The Houthis seek to capitalize on American strikes and use them as a tool to gain local and external sympathy by linking the strikes to the Israeli war on Gaza and presenting themselves as defenders of the Palestinian issue in the face of Israel and the United States.

In this context, experts believe that the current escalation is in the interest of the Houthis who won popular sympathy and support even of some of their opponents because of the highly-charged associations of the Palestinian issue in the consciousness of the Yemeni people. According to political analysts, for a long time, the Houthis have been "looking for an opportunity to engage in a confrontation with the United States. Over the past years, they have been telling their supporters that they were in war with the United States and Israel." The current escalation will give the Houthis an opportunity to initiate more provocative actions. Apparently, their "strategy is based on the assumption of the American limited ability to respond strongly, especially in light of the American preoccupation with the presidential elections."

Observers believe that strikes against the Houthis can lead to the collapse of Yemeni peace negotiations, and resumption of Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi and Emirati targets or on American bases in the Gulf region. This concern, inter alia, that was voiced by Saudi Arabia in special talks with the United States. As the Houthis link their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea with the war on Gaza in one way or another, the direct response to those attacks might be interpreted as siding with the Israel, which plays into the hands of the Houthis and conforms with their rhetoric in which they present themselves as a major party defending Palestine.

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Although the majority of previous agreements with the Houthis stumbled for reasons related to the intransigence of the Houthis themselves, in the current situation the Houthis will have many justifications to evade their previous commitments in relation to the armistice and preparations to stop the war, especially as they consider themselves in an open confrontation with the United States and Israel, which exempts them - in their view - from any internal obligations, whether with regard to peace negotiations or their running of areas under their control in northern Yemen. This is further complicated by their continuous threats of internal and external escalation.

Here, the possible repercussions will go beyond the national borders to the regional and international arenas, especially as escalation is linked to an important strategic geographical region; namely, the Strait of Bab al-Mandab. The Houthis have threatened to target American and international interests, including the warships and ships of the new maritime coalition member countries, targeting Saudi Arabia, the UAE and oil facilities, if they were attacked.

Of course, repercussions of escalation will not be restricted to security and military conditions, but will rather extend to economic conditions at the level of the countries of the region and global trade traffic, especially since the international waterway that constitutes the battlefield of the current escalation is the lane that transits energy, oil and commercial ships. The current crisis has prompted several shipping companies to reroute their vessels away from the Red Sea, in spite of the extra effort, time and money involved in this measure, a matter which will have consequences that are as terrible as those of military escalation.

Conclusion

Tension in the Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea has started a few years ago, especially in light of the competition between regional and international powers. Yet, tension escalated to an unprecedented scale since October 2023 when the Houthis began targeting commercial ships in the region, linking those attacks with the Israeli war on Gaza. Then, the situation escalated alarmingly in the past days after the United States and the UK began launched military strikes against the Houthis in several provinces in Yemen.

In the face of these developments, the situation in the region has become on the verge of a labyrinth, especially since Washington and its allies appear to determined to contain the Israeli war within the borders of the Gaza Strip, and they always announce that they work hard to prevent an expansion of war in the region.

While the United States views launching strikes against the Houthis as an important step to prevent the expansion of conflict, other actors – including some superpowers such as Russia and China - think that the American escalation in the Red Sea ignites a new conflict in a the most vital region for international trade transit and which connects east and west.

Whether tension continues at its current level or war expands to new areas and parties, the strategic area in the southern Red Sea remains a theater of mobilization of regional and international military forces competing to expand their influence and boost their presence.

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